

## Facts are no more solid, coherent, round and real than pearls are

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In 2002, I began to collaborate with cultural producers in Kabul and Tehran on projects dealing with gender representation and the political and social changes that have taken place since 1979. This was preceded by a study of Iranian cinema. As a group of students at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, we intended to respond to the highly questionable propositions made by Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations* as well as the debates ensuing after 9/11 by dealing with the medium of film. Iranian films by Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Rakhshan Bani-E'temad and others had become popular in France and Italy and in other countries starting from the 1980s. Despite political restrictions, these directors succeeded, each in their own way, in addressing topical social issues within Iran. In addition to these art-house films, we also examined works of younger film-makers, some of whom lived outside of Iran. Impressed by these films, which visualise contradictions in Tehran, a metropolis of millions, I developed the idea for a script on the changes this city has undergone since the revolution in 1979.

In November 2002, I fly to Tehran for the first time to do research there, accompanied by the Iranian-Swiss film-maker Sonia Shaf'i. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, an important person for my research, happens to be not in Tehran but filming in Kabul. We spontaneously accept the invitation to visit him in the Afghan capital and book a flight from Tehran. He is assisting the Afghan film-maker Siddiq Barmak

in shooting *Osama*, the first Afghan feature film produced since the fall of the Taliban regime.

We drive directly to the shooting location. The re-enactment of a demonstration of women against the Taliban regime is being filmed. More than 1,000 women are gathered to participate as extras. Nobody had reckoned on such a huge number. Now, they are rehearsing the demonstration, and the production assistant urges the extras to recall their experiences of the recent Taliban past. I use a video camera to document the making of this scene.

Re-enactment of a protest by women against the prohibition to work by the Taliban regime during the making of the film *Osama* by Siddiq Barmak in November 2002.



Back in Berlin, the film-maker Elfe Brandenburger and I edit a short film from my documentary material, entitled *The Making of a Demonstration*. The film focuses on the necessary processes that make scenes in a feature film convincing: the rehearsal of the lay actresses, the repetition of individual scenes, preparing the props, the waiting – and, in the end, paying the protagonists.

In 2004, I return to Kabul, together with Elfe Brandenburger. We want to find out what moved the women – even if they were masked by burkas – to participate in such large numbers in a demonstration scene against the regime so shortly after the Taliban had been toppled. What were their motives? What effect did performing as actresses have on them? What forms of women's resistance against the Taliban regime had existed, and what strategies are they currently pursuing? We are also interested in the different performative strategies used in everyday life, ranging from political work to acting.

The protagonists adjust the production of the film to their own conditions in order, within that framework, to participate in a public statement. They act as co-producers of the image, shaping the content of scenes and moving in and out of the role of director. This is apparent in the parts of the film that reveal our shooting conditions – most clearly in the preparatory scene with the actress and schoolteacher Aiqela Rezaie as she explains how we must behave in order to be allowed to film her at her school. She explains what it would mean for her socially if she is seen as collaborating with us. To avoid this, she outlines a plan for approaching the headmistress of the school – a plan to which we strictly adhere. In another scene, the interpreter Sakeena Habib-zada interrupts the shooting by asking me to turn off the camera before entering the faculty room. The protagonist Malek\_a insists that we record sound only in our conversation with her. Our own visibility is thus marked precisely at the point where the protagonists become active authors of the film process.

Life and character collide and overlap, as do playfulness and activism. Marina Golbahari, the lead actress in *Osama*, explains how her role in the film relates to her real life. The policewoman Saba Sahar produces action films in which she plays the leading part as a

policewoman. She stages increasingly sophisticated martial-arts scenes, while simultaneously demanding the binding rule of law. The former teacher and actress Breshna Bahar appears as the spokeswoman of the fictive female president of Afghanistan. In a demonstration scene, the two actresses Hamida Refah and Zobaida Sahar, who play the grandmother and daughter in *Osama*, demand the improvement of their housing situation. Hamida takes over directing as we stage a scene from a fairy tale. The actresses of the demonstration scene in *Osama* speak of their current political problems. A girls' theatre group rehearses educative plays about the upcoming elections; the male roles are alternately played by different girls.

We return to Kabul in 2006, to discuss the rough cut with those involved. Breshna Bahar asks us to remove a dance scene with her because dancing in public is deemed unseemly, especially for women. Another protagonist, recently married into a very conservative family,



Teacher Aiqela Rezaie, who works as an actress and directs documentary films.

is no longer allowed to appear in any film whatsoever. Since her scenes are important to us and we don't want to delete them completely, we develop a digital effect retaining the figure's movements but abstracting identifiable facial expressions. These consultations and changes are necessary in order to show the film in Afghanistan without causing problems for the protagonists in their daily lives.

There are women in the film who don't want to be recognised for other reasons: an activist of the covertly operating organisation RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), which advocates the separation of state and religion; women whose husbands, brothers or sons forbid them to play in films; the girl who earns a living for her family as a boy. They consciously opt for different strategies to make themselves anonymous, thus remaining visible in the film by being unidentifiable. Burka and chador become strategic instruments, and the separation of image and sound enables us to establish anonymity on other levels.

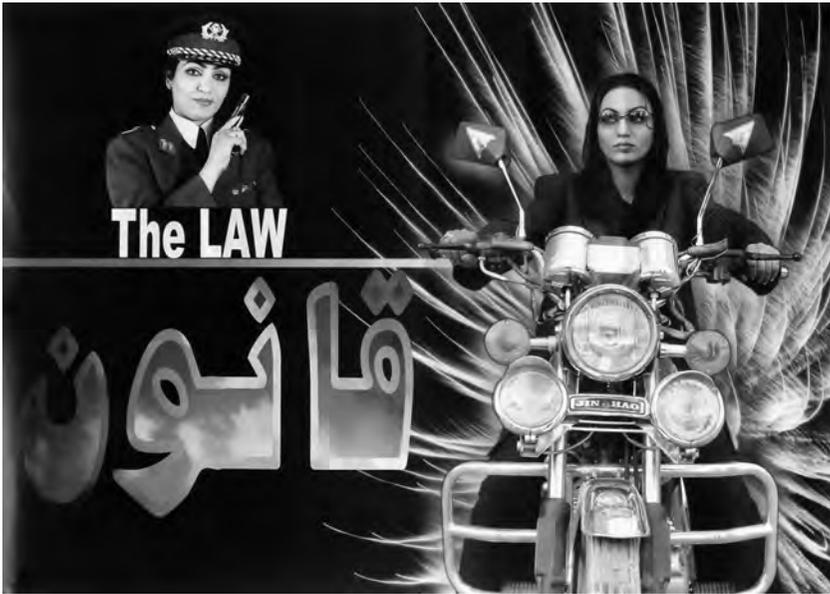


Rehearsal of the girls' theatre group in Kabul in 2006. They rehearse a play dealing with the upcoming elections.

As we assemble *Passing the Rainbow*, we do not question the exact genre of the film being made. Rather, our approach is inspired and influenced by the theme of acting, by questions related to how representation is engendered and by the collaborative production process of a film. *Passing the Rainbow* manoeuvres the borders of various genres. We combine film excerpts, making-of recordings, scenes we staged ourselves and documentary recordings of protagonists speaking about their filmic or political work. This variegated material is edited into smaller and larger intertwined dramaturgical sequences, which, as episodes, form an overarching narrative. We opt for an analytical approach showing the different methods with which the protagonists in Kabul intervene in social and gender-hegemonic processes – no matter whether this takes place on the level of acting, in political work or in everyday life. To avoid presenting the difficulties of specific protagonists as the fate of a single individual, some conflicts are dramatised in collaboration with the women. This creates a scope of action in which a process of appropriation and shifting takes place, for example by playing male roles in the girls' theatre group. Gender roles are reflected and possibilities of action can be practised in a playful setting, transcending existing restrictions. In *Passing the Rainbow*, switching gender roles is anchored in a socio-political reality through Malek\_a: a girl living as a boy in order to earn a living for her family. *Passing the Rainbow* is about shifting/traversing the binary organisation of gender roles and about the gutsy, subversive aspect of changing existing gender and power constellations. These actions cannot be reduced to an identity or to specific political concepts.

### Speaking nearby

While editing the film, I discover the text *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning* by the Vietnamese-American director Trinh T. Minh-ha. It begins as follows: 'There is no such thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques.'<sup>1</sup> For me, Minh-ha's provocative opening had a liberating effect. She directs thinking and speaking towards the film itself and demands a way of speaking that eludes fixed categories and



Poster of the film *Qanun (The Law)*, by the director and actress Saba Sahar, who works in her main profession as a policewoman. In this homespun action movie, Saba Sahar plays a superheroine, a policewoman combating corruption, child kidnapping and sexual abuse. She turns up to enforce moral law wherever state structures seem to be lacking.

classifications. This demand for precise formulations, going beyond defined standards, reveals parallels to the fragile process of montage where each cut marks an important decision in the production process. Minh-ha also points to the power structures inherent in reality itself, in which the producer intervenes in a shaping way with her work on the film:

Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction. To understand this is to recognise the naivety of a development of cinematic technology that promotes increasing unmediated 'access' to reality. ... A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction.<sup>2</sup>

In *Passing the Rainbow*, we are therefore interested both in existing gender–power constellations in society and in cinematic representation.

The classical ethnographic film resists the artificiality of cinema. Even if it is now accepted by most ethnographic film-makers that

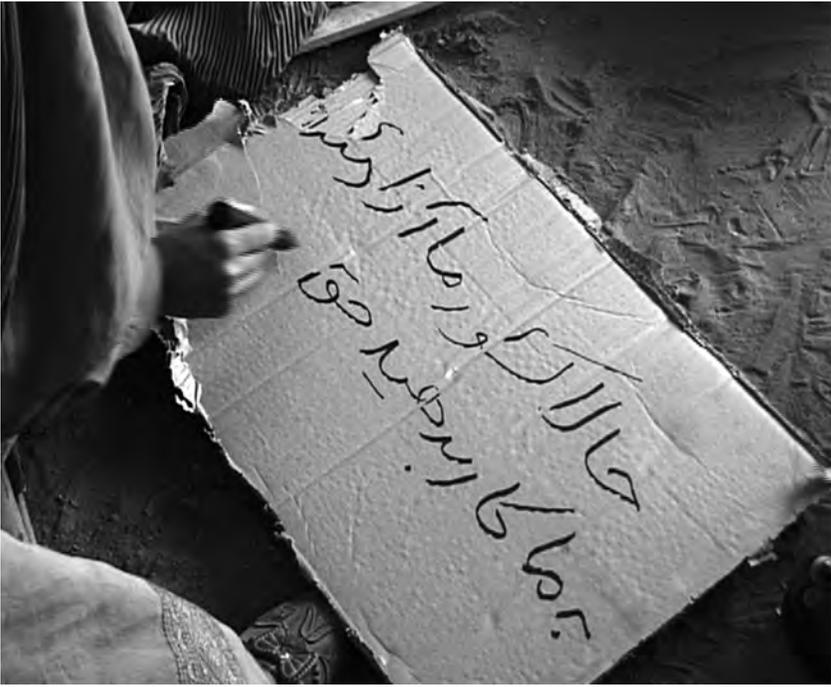
filmic recordings are not objective, such recordings are still being collected to analyse culture and thus serve as a foundation for scientific research. In the context of a three-year ethnographic research project in Senegal, Minh-ha shot the film *Reassemblage* (1982), which I saw in 2008 – after our film was completed – in Barcelona as part of the film series ‘Etnografies Experimentals’.<sup>3</sup> Images are repeatedly interrupted, shown without sound, and then sound is faded in again and takes on a life of its own. The off-screen voice of Minh-ha reflects on her role as an observer, as well as on the role of the missionary and the social workers. By disrupting the process of representation on different levels, she expands the medium of film. In applying this approach, she refuses to establish meaning by speaking ‘about a culture’. The process of ‘speaking about’ is replaced by a ‘speaking nearby’, by the film-maker abandoning an objective viewpoint. Precisely for this reason, we point out at the beginning of our film that *Passing the Rainbow* is not a film about women in Afghanistan. We seek to make it clear that we neither take on an objective narrator perspective nor speak from a gender-binary perspective. In an interview with Nancy N. Chen, Minh-ha describes the process of ‘speaking nearby’ as follows:

A speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition.<sup>4</sup>

Minh-ha believes that the political becomes visible precisely in ambiguous attributions and cannot be separated from aesthetics:

If life’s paradoxes and complexities are not to be suppressed, the question of degrees and nuances is incessantly crucial. Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather, empties it, or decentralizes it.<sup>5</sup>

*Passing the Rainbow* offers various strategies to abandon a one-dimensional reading in favour of multi-perspectivity: the female protagonists, who are co-producers and appear in different roles or



Staging a protest of women in 2006 at the same location, where the protest scene of the film *Osama* by Siddiq Barmak was filmed in November 2002.

comment on the roles they play, the visualisation of the production conditions, our influence on making the film and the making-of scenes reflecting on how authenticity is produced.

### The film continues

Our film *Passing the Rainbow* premieres in May 2008 at the Kabul Second Take Film Festival on gender and society.<sup>6</sup> There are conflicting responses. Some find the film too many-voiced. Others regard precisely this quality as its strong point and recognise the passing of the rainbow as the dramaturgical thread. Passing the rainbow refers to an Afghan myth, according to which boys and girls can change their gender, if they like, when passing the rainbow. This is the story the grandmother tells her granddaughter in the film *Osama* before giving her a masculine haircut. In our film, the myth is referred to in

the title and a schoolgirl retells it when talking about the film *Osama*. Triggered by the German accent of the Dari commentary, the purity of language is also controversially discussed and then connected to the theme of migration. The use of the burka as a media-strategic decision is interpreted in different ways. Some don't want to read it as a strategy for anonymity because they don't regard it as necessary for speaking in public.

### Stagings

In 2008, the curators Montse Romani and Virginia Villaplana suggest showing *Passing the Rainbow* in Barcelona within the context of the exhibition *Working Documents*. I decide not to show the film as an exhibition loop; I would instead like to present it as a joint venture at the festival Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones de Barcelona. The screening is accompanied by a panel discussion to which we invite the Kabul director Diana Saqeb. Her film *25 Darsad (25 Per Cent)*, about female members of parliament in Kabul, is also shown at the festival. This cooperation enables us to expand the exhibition format and to connect with projects in Barcelona dealing with similar subject matters. For the exhibition itself, I edit the two-channel video installation *to act in history*. The installation uses the origination process of the film *Passing the Rainbow* as the starting point, rearranges the used material, takes up scenes that were not included in the film, reflects on how the film was received in Berlin and Kabul and adds rarely shown historical recordings from the archives of the Nancy Hatch Duprée and Williams Afghan Media Project. In so doing, I again refer to the image as a process that denies an unambiguous attribution, a process that can be continued by reception.

Behind the installation is a mobile cinema offering a selection of five films. Visitors can choose which one they want to view. The films were shot in Afghanistan and Iran and deal with the construction of gender relations. In addition to the film *Passing the Rainbow*, two other films shot in Afghanistan in 2007 can be viewed here: the already mentioned documentary *25 Darsad* by Diana Saqeb and the action film *Nejat (Rescue)* by Saba Sahar, in which the director plays



Sima Shadan in the role of the poetess and princess Rabia from Balkh in the Afghan period film *Rabia-e Balkhi* from 1974. The film is about the tenth-century poetess and princess who, with her love of a serf, had rebelled against the love and class relations of the time. She paid for it with her life and the ensuing rebellion of the serfs led to liberation from tyranny.

the role of a superheroine. Both films deal in different ways with the ‘democratisation process’ that commenced in 2002. The short feature film *Saya (Shadow)* by Nacir Alqas from 1990 refers to the brief history of Afghan cinema and portrays the difficulties of a war widow and her child from her first marriage. The film *Le Mouvement de Libération des Femmes Iraniennes – année zéro (The Liberation Movement of Iranian Women in the Year Zero)* from 1979 expands the scope to include the neighbouring country of Iran. The documentary film shot by the French group Psychoanalysis and Politics in the streets of Tehran accompanies the first protests against the newly established regime: women demonstrating against the decree of the revolutionary leader Khomeini demanding mandatory veiling.

The entire installation is titled *Stagings*. With the notion of stage or staging, I refer to the constructedness of reality: to different cinematic representations, as well as to stagings in political and social everyday life. The installation was previously on view in a slightly altered form in September 2008 in Jet gallery, Berlin, in an exhibition series curated by Lena Ziese, which was dedicated to artists whose concepts of life have an impact on their artistic practices.

In Afghanistan, disillusionment is now widespread, both with Western ‘aid’ and with local politics. Colleagues who work for international NGOs already discussed a year ago where to go next after the withdrawal of the international troops in 2014. My friends and

colleagues in Kabul are at a loss, just as I am, as to how things will go in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, many people are trying to continue their work as well as they can and to influence social and political processes within the scope of their possibilities. In spring 2013, the first international women's film festival took place in Herat, organised and joined by the protagonists of the small and active film scene in Afghanistan.

## NOTES

1. Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning', in *When the Moon Waxes Red* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 29.
2. Madeleine Bernstorff elaborates on the relation of reality and fiction in documentary films in 'Contested Documentary Values', in Sandra Schäfer (ed.), *Stagings: Kabul, Film and Production of Representation* (Berlin: b\_books, 2009), pp. 39–41.
3. The film series *Etnografies Experimentals* was curated by Virginia Villaplana and Montse Romani and was shown in the context of the film festival *Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones de Barcelona*.
4. Nancy N. Chen, 'Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 8 (1) (1992): 82–91, p. 87.
5. Minh-ha, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning', p. 41.
6. We curated the festival in collaboration with the artists' group CACA–Kabul, the state-run film institute Afghan Film and the Berlin-based artist Zara Zandieh. The festival in Kabul was preceded by the film programme SPLICE IN in Kassel, Berlin and Hamburg ([www.mazefilm.de](http://www.mazefilm.de)).

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